

'I COVET YOUR SKULL': DEATH AND DESIRE IN *HAMLET*

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

O skull! O skull! O skull! I hold thee out . . .
Was here the brain that wrought some forty plays . . .
And brought forth endless comments everywhere?¹
Belgrave Titmarsh, *Shakspeare's Skull* (1889)

You interest me very much, Mr. Holmes. I had hardly expected so dolichocephalic a skull or such well-marked supra-orbital development. Would you have any objection to my running my finger along your parietal fissure? A cast of your skull, sir, until the original is available, would be an ornament to any anthropological museum. It is not my intention to be fulsome, but I confess that I covet your skull.²

A. Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902)

I am Hamlet the Dane
Skull-handler, parablist . . .
Seamus Heaney, 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces' (1975)³

I

In July 1648 John Evelyn, early and influential member of the Royal Society, sat for prolific portraitist Robert Walker.⁴

1st July. I sate for my picture, in which there is a Death's head, to Mr. Walker, that excellent painter.

The painting was designed to accompany *Instructions Oeconomique*, a treatise on marriage written for Evelyn's (very) young wife. He had hoped to have it executed as a miniature 'by Peter Oliver, Hoskins or Johnson', but with Oliver dead and the other two unavailable, Evelyn 'could meet with none capable'.⁵ This context of marital intimacy now seems out of keeping with the image, which displays Eve-

lyn with one hand embracing a human skull, and is annotated by a Greek motto ('Repentance is the beginning of Philosophy').

As a whole the portrait condenses a wide range of semiotic codes. The figure is pensive and romantic, dressed in the chiaroscuro costume of Renaissance melancholy, a sighing lover, cheek on hand. The introduction of the skull and the accompanying hortatory text subsumes the image into the tradition of *memento mori*, where the skull functions as a ghastly or salutary reminder of mortality.

But when the portrait was displayed at the National Portrait Gallery in 2000 as part of an exhibition of 'Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660–2000',⁶ alongside Herschel and Faraday and

Thanks to Dr Carol Banks and Dr Ruth Richardson for their help with this paper; and to Dr Bryan Loughrey for resurrecting my interest in skulls.

¹ Belgrave Titmarsh, *Shakspeare's Skull and Falstaff's Nose: A Fancy in Three Acts* (London, 1889), p. 25.

² Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London, 1902), p. 13.

³ Seamus Heaney, 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces', *North* (1975), from *New Selected Poems 1966–1987* (London, 1990), p. 60.

⁴ John Evelyn, *Diary and Correspondence*, vol. 1, ed. William Bray (London, 1883), 255. See also Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual 1500–1800* (London, 1991), p. 12.

⁵ W. G. Hiscock, *John Evelyn and his Family Circle* (London, 1955), 20–1. See also Oliver Millar, *The Age of Charles I: Painting in England 1620–1649* (London, 1972), p. 102.

⁶ See the associated book by Ludmila Jordanova, *Defining Features: Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660–2000* (London, 2000).

DEATH AND DESIRE IN *HAMLET*



39. John Evelyn by Robert Walker.

Jenner, the pose was read as typical of ‘men of learning’:

The supporting hand indicates the weight of learning, and the skull is a *memento mori*.⁷

Here the skull remains a token of mortality, but in a context of scientific inquiry and medical knowledge; while the ‘melancholy’ pose has less to do with love and more (as in Durer’s famous engraving *Melancholia*) with learning. Skulls were often depicted in this period as seamless and uniform, and with the mandible attached, hence presumably not drawn from what we ironically call ‘life’. The skull in the portrait is realistically delineated, clearly showing the coronal and squamous sutures and the left temporal bone, so as an anatomical specimen it was not out of place in that scientific pantheon.

In its overdetermined totality the portrait presents us with what now seems an incongruous

rapprochement of opposites: love and death, marriage and bereavement, romance and science, desire and thought. The hand that took a young bride in marriage now caresses a death’s head; the effete pose of a melancholy lover mocks the stern spirit of scientific inquiry. Yet as we shall see, this image, which is both traditional and modern, takes us deep into the early modern love-affair with death, which is as inseparable from seventeenth-century thought as it is from modern post-Freudian philosophy. Everywhere in seventeenth-century culture, and classically in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, we will find the marriage of Eros and Thanatos, the union of love and death. And at the heart of this mystery lies the human skull.

II

The most famous theatrical prop in the history of drama, possibly in the history of Western culture, is a human skull, that which appears in the fifth act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.⁸ It is one of a number of skulls unearthed from Ophelia’s newly dug grave. Multiple occupancy of graves in the sixteenth century was nothing unusual, as David Cressy notes: ‘Gravediggers . . . often encountered the remains of previous burials. Fresh bodies were superimposed on those who had gone before’.⁹ The skull is named as ‘Yoricks Scull, the Kings Iester’ (3369). The skull is the one part of the human skeleton immediately recognizable as human bone; and among the remains of the grave’s

⁷ Christopher Martyn, Review of National Portrait Gallery exhibition ‘Defining Features: Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660–2000’, *British Medical Journal*, 320 (2000), 1546.

⁸ All references to *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark* are to *The Norton Facsimile: the First Folio of Shakespeare*, edited by Charlton Hinman (New York, 1968), and cite Hinman’s ‘Through Line Numbers’ (TLN).

⁹ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: ritual, religion and the life cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1999), 466. John Donne anticipated encountering this practice post-mortem in ‘The Relic’: ‘When my grave is broke up again / Some second guest to entertain’. *Poems of John Donne*, ed. E. K. Chambers, vol. 1 (London, 1896), pp. 66–7.

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

various occupants, Yorick's skull is evidently identifiable by some obvious physiognomic characteristics. In Kenneth Branagh's film version the skull is identified (not just to the cast but potentially to the audience as well), by its grotesque teeth, as belonging to the comedian Ken Dodd, who then plays Yorick in two interpolated flashback scenes where we see him playing with the young Hamlet and entertaining the court.¹⁰ Hamlet holds the skull to camera, and a dissolve fills in Dodd's face around it, much as Hamlet imaginatively reconstructs the remembered face in his mind's eye.

Hamlet uses the other excavated skulls as props for a generalized satire on human frailty and corruption.¹¹ But when faced with Yorick's skull, his response is much more personal and intimate.

Alas poore Yorick, I knew him *Horatio*, a fellow of infinite Jest; of most excellent fancy, he hath borne me on his backe a thousand times: And how abhorred my Imagination is, my gorge rises at it. Heere hung those lipps, that I haue kist I know not how oft. VV here be your libes now? Your Gambals? Your Songs? Your flashes of Merriment that were wont to set the Table on a Rore? No one now to mock your own leering? Quite chopfalne? Now get you to my Ladies Chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thicke, to this fauour she must come.

Make her laugh at that . . . (3372–82).

Knowing whose skull he is addressing, Hamlet undertakes a forensic reconstruction of the object, restoring its features ('heere hung those lipps'), reawakening its voice ('That Scull had a tongue in it, and could sing once', 3267).¹² Revulsion from the horror of human decomposition ('my gorge rises at it') co-exists with desire for the flesh that has gone ('lipps, that I haue kist'). Vivid recollections of the comedian at work ('leering'), contrast with an awed contemplation of his present dumbness, mandible misplaced ('Chaplesse', 'chopfalne'), lost for words. The imagination that dwells on death is both nostalgic and abhorrent. Making way for Ophelia's remains (a circumstance Hamlet does not know, but the audience does), Yorick's skull also has the versatility to double as the true features underlying the painted face of a woman: 'to this fauour she must come' (3381–2). Echoing the well-known

'Death and the Maiden' motif, which Gertrude also elaborates with her metaphors of the grave as a marriage bed, the death's head is held up to female vanity as a compelling image of 'the skull beneath the skin'.¹³

We can see what is implicit in *Hamlet* more fully and extravagantly fleshed out in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Vindice addresses Gloriana's skull:

Thou sallow picture of my poison'd love,
My study's ornament, thou shell of death,
Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,
When life and beauty naturally fill'd out
These ragged imperfections,
When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set
In those unsightly rings: then 'twas a face . . .¹⁴

The skull is both object and effigy, an empty 'shell of death' but also a 'picture' of Gloriana. It is both a decorative exhibit in the *memento mori* tradition ('my study's ornament') and the relic of a living body (indeed what Jeremy Bentham would have called an 'auto-icon'). As such it suggests both presence and absence, and Vindice reconstructs the life that 'fill'd out' its hollow bareness, the bright eyes that once adorned its 'unsightly rings', just as Hamlet, in Michael Neill's words, '(like a milder Vindice) immediately adorns [Yorick's] pate with the dress of memory'.¹⁵ When Vindice passes off the skull as a living woman in order to poison the Duke, the grotesque simulation of vitality again draws attention to the true lifelessness of the remains:

¹⁰ *Hamlet*, dir. Kenneth Branagh (Castle Rock, 1996).

¹¹ Roland Mushat Frye was among the first to define the tradition in 'Ladies, Gentlemen and Skulls: *Hamlet* and the Iconographic Traditions', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 30 (1979), 15–28.

¹² These words are addressed of course to another previously exhumed and anonymous skull, not to Yorick's.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, 'Whispers of Immortality', *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London, 1963), 55. Modern technology can reconstruct the skin from the skull, the face from the facial bones.

¹⁴ *The Revenger's Tragedy*, 1.1.14–20, in *Thomas Middleton: Five Plays*, ed. Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor (London, 1988).

¹⁵ Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford, 1997), 235.

DEATH AND DESIRE IN *HAMLET*

... here's an eye
Able to tempt a great man – to serve God;
A pretty hanging lip, that has forgot now to
dissemble,
Methinks this mouth should make a swearer
tremble . . .

(3.5.54–7).

Just as Hamlet is painfully conscious of the extreme contrast between his imaginative reconstruction of Yorick and the object itself – ‘*This?*’ – so Vindice also voices a similarly disgusted awareness of ironic discrepancy – ‘*For thee?*’:

Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
For thee?

(3.5.71–2).

Both Hamlet and Vindice are playing out what Douglas Bruster called ‘variations on a single rhetorical question concerning the lack of fit between the object at hand and a complex set of memories and truths separate from it’.¹⁶

They are also both to some degree adhering to the ancient *memento mori* tradition, and more specifically recuperating a century of the *Danse Macabre*, which travelled quickly from the walls of Les Innocents in Paris to St Paul’s, and thence to the Guild Chapel in Stratford-upon-Avon, where it was observed by John Stowe, and noted in a manuscript addition to his copy of Leland’s *Itinerary*, in 1576. It was there for the young Shakespeare to see, complete with a representation of ‘a King Eaten by Worms’, and an image showing a coffin or grave with a shrouded and vermiculated corpse; two skulls, and three scattered bones; and two men positioned on either side, pointing to a *contemptus mundi* text.¹⁷ The basic trope of the Dance of Death is to demonstrate the interlinking of life and death by showing skeletons of the dead seizing the living in indiscriminate rapture: young and old, rich and poor, men, women and children.¹⁸ In the Stratford representation the figures of death are walking corpses, complete with skin but with grinning skull-like faces: often *Danse Macabre* images showed the living body both youthful and ageing, alongside the decomposing corpse and the unfleshed skeleton. Indeed when Hamlet and Laertes in the First

Quarto text are wrestling in Ophelia’s grave, their live bodies entangled with a newly dead corpse and with long-dead remains, the stage exhibits a classic *Danse Macabre* iconography.¹⁹ Hamlet himself of course alludes to this tradition when he describes how ‘a king may go a Progresse through the guts of a Begger’ (2693), and in the graveyard scene talks of the ‘fine Reuolution’ (3280) which brings all flesh to one final resting place. Similar juxtapositions of the living, the corpse in deathbed or shroud, and the denuded skull, all linked into a continuous and unbroken cycle, appear in images such as *The Judd Marriage*, which shows the living couple touching hands on a skull, while below them lies a shrouded but uncovered corpse; or in John Souch’s painting of *Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife*, which shows the widower with hand on skull and his wife pictured twice, once living and once dead.²⁰

¹⁶ Douglas Bruster, ‘The Dramatic Life of Objects’, in Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 17.

¹⁷ See Thomas Fisher, *A Series of Antient Allegorical, Historical, and Legendary Paintings Which Were Discovered in the Summer of 1804 on the Walls of the Chapel of the Trinity at Stratford upon Avon in Warwickshire*. Most of the plates are annotated as ‘Drawn 1804 and published 20 April 1807’. Plates reproduced in Clifford Davidson, *The Guild Chapel Wall Paintings at Stratford-upon-Avon* (New York, 1988), pp. 10–11. Fisher did not see the dance of Death, which was exposed in 1955 and drawn by Wilfrid Puddephat: ‘The Mural paintings of the Dance of Death in the Guild Chapel of Stratford-upon-Avon’, *Birmingham Archaeological Society Transactions*, 76 (1960). Drawing reproduced by Davidson, Plate 19.

¹⁸ ‘From sodaine death/ Good Lorde deliuer us’, ‘The Letany’, quoted from *A Booke of Christian Prayers, collected out of the auncient writers, etc.* (London, 1578, 1581), p. 127. In this popular manual known as *Queen Elizabeth’s Prayer-Book* the Dance of Death riots in the margins of the text, so ‘sodaine death’ is amply illustrated by images of skeletons seizing the living, skulls, piles of bones and corpses.

¹⁹ Carol Rutter describes the stage of Hamlet as filled with ‘bodies presented in all stages of poets-mortem recuperation, from ghost-walking Hamlet to fresh-bleeding Polonius to mouldering Yorick to Priam of deathless memory’. See Carol Chillington Rutter, *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare’s Stage* (London, 2001), p. 28.

²⁰ Anonymous, *The Judd Marriage* (1560), Dulwich Picture Gallery; John Souch, *Sir Thomas Aston at the Deathbed of his Wife*, (1635), Manchester City Art Gallery.

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

But the point about Yorick's skull is that it is not a mere anonymized object readily available as a visual aid to generic satire, lamentation or *memento mori* (like the skull that lies on the floor, almost kicked aside, in the powerful 1544 portrait of Sir Thomas Gresham in the art collection of the Mercers' Company),²¹ but an individualized skull, the recognizable remains of someone known and loved. As Andrew Sofer puts it, 'naming the skull transforms the scene. It is a moment of unmetaphorizing in which the conventionalized figure of speech has suddenly become humanized.'²² As such the skull occupies a liminal position (as in Hamlet's evocation of the living Yorick), between life and death, since it can still (unlike the anonymous bones of the skeleton) resemble, or be held to resemble, the living person whose life it formerly contained. Although the skull is composed of more than twenty-two separate bones they are in Gray's words 'almost immovably connected'.²³ Even in advanced decomposition the skull retains its unique rounded completeness and its capacity to retain facial features – such as cheekbones and teeth – that are identifying characteristics of the living face. The teeth are often a focus of attention in this context, not just because they provide the skull with a parodic human expression, but because they are in life an integral part of the expressive language of the face: the only part of the skeleton, in fact, not covered by soft tissue and therefore visible, and so contributory to the notorious similarity of the skull to a living head.

At the same time, with its hollow orbits, empty vomer, and enigmatic grin a skull is disturbingly unlike any living face, except one very close to death. In short the human skull is a textbook representation of what Freud called the 'uncanny', which primarily consists in 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate'.²⁴ Examples given in Freud's essay are waxwork figures, dolls, and automata.²⁵ Any representation involving such liminal ambiguity between life and death fits into the category of 'uncanny', such as the superb illustrations to Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), which show

a skeleton adopting various human postures: leaning on a shovel, possibly weeping with head in hands, even contemplating another skull. Ruth Richardson has described these as akin to 'X-rays', seeing in cross-section through the active living body to view its internal frame.²⁶ At the same time the figures recall irresistibly the sardonic skeletal jesters of the Dance of Death. The Hamlet-like skeleton with his hand on a skull which appears on p. kv is haunted by his living counterpart, as from the verso page the image of a man holding a skull clearly shows through (Vesalius, p. kv).²⁷

III

Skulls on stage are even more 'uncanny' because of what Sofer calls 'their disturbing ability to oscillate between subject and object' (Sofer, p. 90). In the *memento mori* tradition the skull is passive, a visual aid or object-lesson. In the *Danse Macabre*

²¹ Anonymous, *Sir Thomas Gresham* (1544), Mercers' Company. This was also a wedding portrait, since it bears an inscription 'AG [Anne Gresham] love, serve and obei TG'.

²² Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor, 2003), p. 98.

²³ Henry Gray, *Anatomy Descriptive and Surgical* (Bath, 2001), p. 19.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919), trans. David McLintock (London, 2003), 135. The definitions are sometimes attributed to Freud, but he was quoting from a paper 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' (1908) by Otto Jentsch.

²⁵ 'Uncanny' is obviously also a fitting description for artefacts constructed from human remains: Byron's drinking cup fashioned from a skull; the 'auto-icon' of Jeremy Bentham at University College, with its mummified head; or the 'plasticized' remains turned into sculptures in Gunter von Hagens' exhibition 'Body Worlds' ('The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies').

²⁶ 'Did they seem to contemporaries as extraordinary as Roentgen's X-rays did in the 1890s?' 'The Skull Beneath the Skin', illustrated lecture in series *Facing Death*, National Portrait Gallery (January 2005). I am grateful to Dr Richardson for supplying me with her notes.

²⁷ Vesalius saw himself as a kind of Resurrection Man *vis-à-vis* the science of anatomy, which in his view needed to be 'recalled from the dead'. See his preface 'To the Divine Charles V, the Mightiest and Most Unvanquished Emperor: Andreas Vesalius' PREFACE to his books *On the Fabric of the Human Body*, Andreas Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (Basel, 1543).

DEATH AND DESIRE IN *HAMLET*

the death's head is alive and active among the living. When Hamlet spoke to Yorick's skull on the London stage around 1600, the dead object was given a role in the *dramatis personae*, transubstantiated into a living character, placed 'centre stage in the act of performance' (Sofer, p. 94). 'Once we focus on it, the skull decenters our own "objective" grasp of its stage symbolism and our presumption of autonomous gazing from outside the emblem's "frame"' (Sofer, p. 92). As in the disturbing fantasy of the ventriloquist's dummy that comes to life, once the actor begins to speak on the skull's behalf, he also begins to invest the skull with autonomous vitality. 'The object cannot speak' writes Scott Dudley: 'it has no agency of its own. If it is to signify at all, it can do so only as a subject makes it speak . . .'²⁸ This semiotic transference was wickedly parodied in the famous Morecombe and Wise *Hamlet* sketch, where the skull was routinely asked 'What do you think of it so far?' and replied (the comedian working its jaw and supplying the voice), 'Rubbish!'.²⁹

In this respect the skull operates as a particularly compelling exemplar of 'the power of stage objects to take on a life of their own in performance' (Sofer, p. 2). On stage the distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, the live body of the actor and the physical property he manipulates, are quite different from those that pertain outside the theatre. Petr Bogatyrev of the Prague School of semioticians argues that as everything on stage signifies, then everything participates in a universal semioticity that occludes the difference between live and dead objects. All stage objects become 'signs of a sign of a material object',³⁰ at a double remove from the real.

Thus the 'function of the stage property duplicates that of the theatre itself: to bring dead images back to life' (Sofer, p. 3). Props in general are 'haunted mediums' that 'ventriloquize an offstage, absent subject' (Sofer, p. 27). But this capability of resurrection is dependent on the specific function of the prop in action. The stage skulls of *Hamlet* illustrate what Jiri Veltrusky called a 'fluid continuum between subjects and objects':³¹ objects can be on stage and lie relatively inert, as the skulls

first lie when excavated by the gravedigger. They can be used as objects, in the way Hamlet uses them as *exempla* in his sardonic and macabre satire. But when props acquire an independent signifying force, as when Hamlet engages in conversation with Yorick's skull, then 'we perceive them as spontaneous subjects, equivalent to the figure of the actor' (Veltrusky, p. 84).

This parallels what de Grazia, Quilligan and Stallybrass find in seventeenth-century *Vanitas* paintings, where 'objects have evicted the subject'.³² In one example the skull is described as sharing the inert passivity of all 'still life': 'The omnipresent skull serves as a reminder of the common materiality of subject and objects' (p. 1). But for all its stillness the skull retains traces of a former subjectivity, bears ineradicable reminders of its occupation by an immaterial human life, and thus stands out from other objects in the painting. Though the painting is empty of subjects, 'a memory of one remains – the *memento mori* or skull, now an object among objects' (de Grazia *et alii*, p. 1). Objectified it may have become, but still it had a tongue in it once, and could sing. 'A skull', Michael Neill explains, 'is at once the most eloquent and empty of human signs. Simultaneously recalling and travestying the head which is the source of all meanings, the seat of all interpretation, the skull acts as a peculiar and sinisterly attractive mirror for the gazer, drawing endless narratives into itself only to cancel them' (Neill, pp. 234–5).

²⁸ Scott Dudley, 'Conferring with the Dead: Necrophilia and Nostalgia in the Seventeenth Century', *ELH*, 66 (1999), 285.

²⁹ For this and other parodies see Derek Longhurst, "'You base football player!": Shakespeare in contemporary popular culture', in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. Graham Holderness (Manchester, 1988), pp. 65–7.

³⁰ Petr Bogatyrev, 'Semiotics in the Folk Theatre', in *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA, 1976), p. 34.

³¹ Jiri Veltrusky, 'Man and Objects in the Theatre', in *Prague School Reader on Aesthetics, Literary Structure and Style*, ed. and trans. Paul L. Garvin (Washington DC, 1964), p. 84.

³² 'Introduction' to *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. M. de Grazia, Maurea Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge, 1996), p. 1.

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

Thus the skull already possesses an overcharged, dangerous capability even outside the semiotically saturated environment of the theatre. Hence its use on stage is multiply powerful. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the use for purposes of representation or performance of a real human skull. When Peter Hall was rehearsing *Hamlet* in 1975 he records the use of a real skull in rehearsal:³³

We rehearsed the graveyard scene this morning with a real skull. The actuality of the scene was immediately apparent; actors, stage management, everybody aware of a dead man's skull among us.

When Polish pianist and composer Andre Tchaikovsky died in 1982, he 'bequeathed his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company for use in *Hamlet*': 'Wrapped in a brown paper-parcel', Stanley Wells recounts, 'it arrived on the general manager's desk one morning along with the rest of the post.'³⁴ Pascale Aebischer records that in 1989 when Mark Rylance was rehearsing the role, he asked the props department 'whether it would be possible to use the real skull that was donated to the RSC as Yorick's skull'.³⁵ Rehearsal notes confirm that the company did use it, with a similar impact to that recorded by Peter Hall, but then stopped short of using it in performance, as noted by Mark Rylance's wife Claire von Kampen (quoted Aebischer, p. 86):

As a company we all felt most privileged to be able to work the Gravedigger scene with a real skull . . . However collectively as a group we agreed that as the real power of theatre lies in the complicity of illusion between actor and audience, it would be inappropriate to use a real skull during the performances . . .

There is also a suggestion that some 'primitive taboo' may have operated to inhibit the use of an identifiable actual skull as signifier of an identifiable fictional skull in a live theatrical performance. 'Because the property disturbingly kept its extrafictional and extratheatrical identity as the property of Andre Tchaikovsky the pianist, it resisted the company's attempts to appropriate it as an accessory' (Aebischer, p. 89). Tchaikovsky's skull was discarded, but a cast of it constructed for the produc-

tion. This conflict between Tchaikovsky's aspiration after posthumous celebrity ('Remember me!') and the company's determination to contain the unruly sign, echoes the debates about ownership acted out in *Hamlet*. Who owns a dead body, or an exhumed skull? Who owns a grave? its previous occupants who are being turfed out to make room for more? The corpse for whom the grave has been re-dug? The gravedigger who has made it and claims artisanal property in it? The mourners who dispute its status, or Hamlet and Laertes who leap in and compete for ownership of the grave and devotion to its intended occupant? In 1982 Tchaikovsky's family contested the terms of his will in the courts, but lost their case. The judgement endorsed Tchaikovsky's right to will his remains, and the RSC's right to appropriate them as a 'property'.³⁶

But such attempts to appropriate the stage 'property' (that which 'belongs to', is appurtenant or appropriate to, the drama) in the case of the skull come up against what Martin Esslin calls 'involuntary semiosis': 'material objects on the stage or screen may contain signifiers that the originators of the performance (the designer, the director) did not intend to be perceived'.³⁷ Frances Teague quotes a definition of the theatrical prop as an

³³ *Peter Hall's Diaries: The Story of a Dramatic Battle*, ed. John Goodwin (London, 1983), 195.

³⁴ Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare For All Time* (London, 2000), p. 398.

³⁵ Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 86.

³⁶ Another fascinating case of disputed ownership of the skull occurred when Major Robert Lawrence received a serious head wound in the Falklands War in 1982. Medical staff took photographs of his brain through the wound and later used them in a presentation to demonstrate their surgical skills. Lawrence saw them for the first time when he attended a lecture on the achievements of battlefield surgery. He subsequently acquired and used them to a different purpose in his autobiographical account of the Falklands War, John Lawrence and Robert Lawrence, *When the Fighting is Over* (London, 1988).

³⁷ Martin Esslin, *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen* (London, 1987), 46.

DEATH AND DESIRE IN *HAMLET*

'unanchored physical object',³⁸ meaning that it is literally free to be moved around the stage, but suggesting also its semiotic indeterminacy and instability: 'A property can carry multiple meanings, which may sometimes conflict' (pp. 16–17). As Douglas Bruster puts it in language appropriate to Yorick's skull, such mobile material objects lend themselves to a wide range of dramatic actions: 'they can be variously possessed, traded, lost, found, concealed and evaluated' (Bruster, p. 17). The Victoria and Albert Museum has an early photogravure of a skull prepared for teaching, probably in the Royal College of Surgeons (some of the bones have been removed). The skull must in reality have been mounted, anchored, on a wooden plinth, but the support has been removed from the print, so the skull floats eerily, 'unanchored' in nebulous space.³⁹ The image is profoundly 'uncanny', signifying in ways never intended by the physicians who originally constructed and used the skull as a pedagogic visual aid.

At least one other hopeful has followed Tchaikovsky's lead and left the RSC a skull. This was aspiring actor Jonathan Hartmann whose application to join the company had been routinely rejected, and who obviously felt this was the only way he would ever get onto the stage. He stipulated that when used, the skull should be credited in the programme: 'the skull of Yorick is played by the skull of Jonathan Hartmann'.⁴⁰ The outcome of this bequest remains to be seen. When American comedy actor Del Close died in 1999 he bequeathed his skull to Chicago's Goodman Theatre, which he had helped to found, so that it 'may be used to play Yorick, or for any other purposes the Goodman deems appropriate'. In this case the theatre has embraced the gift, exhibiting the skull in a glass case in the Artistic Director's office, and using it as a static prop in at least one production.⁴¹ These bids for thespian immortality are obviously testimony to the strength of actorly ambition, as strong as death. But is it more than the vanity of players? Even as an inert decorative object the skull inevitably draws attention to itself. Placed among other objects into a *Vanitas* painting, or foregrounded on stage, its semiotic power is multiplied.

To the actor the opportunity of playing Yorick is clearly irresistible, since the role brings the skull into that liminal half-light between life and death that the theatre so eloquently adumbrates. The skull is neither object nor subject; neither person nor actor; neither character nor role. It is speechless yet expressive; blank but eloquent; empty yet replete with signifying potency. What actor would not wish to play, and be, such a skull? To survive into theatrical immortality; to cheat death; to exist as a dead subject among the living?

IV

These stories problematize the relationship between the living and the dead; but there has never been a time when that relationship was unproblematic. Early modern social attitudes towards death have been well charted in recent years. Phillippe Aries⁴² has traced the transition from the ancient world, where the dead were treated as impure and placed outside the city (giving rise to the differentiation between 'polis' and 'necropolis', cities of living and dead), to the mediaeval Christian world where 'the dead ceased to frighten the living, and the two groups co-existed in the same places and behind the same walls' (Aries, p. 30). Via Christian faith in the resurrection of the body, and the practice of worshipping ancient martyrs and their tombs (Aries, pp. 30–1), the taboo separation of living and dead was eroded: tombs were built round cemeteries, churches became 'surrounded and

³⁸ Frances Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* (Lewisburg, 1991), p. 15.

³⁹ See Mark Haworth-Booth, ed., *Things: A Spectrum of Photography 1850–2001* (London, 2005), pp. 34–5.

⁴⁰ See David Lister, 'Yorick, I'll play his skull!', *The Independent*, 1 March 1995.

⁴¹ *Chicago Tribune*, 27 July 2004; *New Improv Page*, 14 January 2005. Available at [www.fuzzycoco.com/improv/archives/000215.html] [Accessed 25 October 2005]. By contrast the replica skull used in Kenneth Branagh's film was presented afterwards to Ken Dodd as a memento.

⁴² Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (Paris, 1977).

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

invaded by the dead' (Aries, p. 34). Christians were 'gathered together within the sacred enclosure, completing the bond of association between the dead and the living' (Cressy, p. 465). In the Middle Ages the place of the dead is sanctified, not polluted, so consecration becomes a proper preparation of the ground to be blessed by their presence. Grave lots were dug over and over again, the bones extracted and placed in ossuaries. Hence as Aries shows, the emergence of a distinction between 'cemetery', burial-plot, and 'charnel', the ossuary where bones dug up to make room for new bodies were placed (pp. 54–5). After the fourteenth-century charnel houses became places of exhibition (Aries, p. 61). Charlemont in *The Atheist's Tragedy* describes the charnel house as a 'convocation-house for dead men's skulls'.⁴³

Thus in the Middle Ages living and dead co-existed far more closely than in the ancient or the modern worlds. As Clare Gittings puts it, 'throughout the Middle Ages there was a far greater perception of continuity between the states of being alive and being dead than we feel today'.⁴⁴ Death was a transitional state: the dead waited for resurrection, and remained amenable to the touch of prayer. Purgatory was a liminal domain within which the dead remained communally bound to the living; or in Gittings' terms, 'The doctrine of purgatory ensured that the living and the dead were closely bound by ritual ties' (Gittings, p. 22).

The Reformation in England altered all this. The chantries fell silent, and the dead disappeared into a void. As Anthony Low puts it, the bereaved were abandoned to a silence when confronting the dead.⁴⁵ Theologically there was a sudden and disruptive shift from corporate to individual expectation of judgement and resurrection. Michael Neill writes: 'The protestant denial of Purgatory . . . suddenly placed the dead beyond the reach of their survivors . . . then death became a more absolute annihilation than ever' (Neill, p. 38). Eamon Duffy describes the reformed funeral service as 'an act of oblivion, a casting out of the dead from the community of the living into a collective anonymity'.⁴⁶ The loss of Purgatory 'affected . . . the social relationship between the living and the dead' (Cressy,

p. 386), enforcing a new degree of separation, with the consequence of severe psychological trauma.⁴⁷

These changes in official doctrine affected popular emotions about the status of human remains. Aries draws a distinction between two strands of historical belief: the view derived from Paracelsus and Jewish medicine, and to be found in some late seventeenth century medical treatises, that the cadaver retained traces of life; and the view derived from Seneca and the ancient world, that soul and body were utterly separate. The latter was espoused by the orthodox Christian elite, and became the view of modern science. At the beginning of the seventeenth century these questions were still clearly alive. Does life belong to the whole body or to its elements? Do human remains retain traces of vitality? In popular belief it was felt that bodies could still feel, hear, bleed at a murderer's touch. Could the skull of a dead person in some way bear the residue of that person's life? Can these bones live?

This takes us exactly to the point where Hamlet's communing with Yorick's skull serves as a textbook demonstration of these residual and emergent ideologies. Just as the skull itself is a liminal object, lying uncannily between life and death, so Hamlet's relationship with it lies between past and future, between Rome and Canterbury, between mediaeval and early modern views of death. From the new reformed perspective the skull is not only an empty shell, a discarded remnant of a vanished life, 'a

⁴³ *The Atheists Tragedy, or the Honest Man's Revenge*, 4.3.73, in *The Plays of Cyril Tourneur* (Cambridge, 1978).

⁴⁴ Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern Britain* (London, 1984), 20.

⁴⁵ Anthony Low, 'Hamlet and the Ghost of Purgatory: Intimations of Killing the Father', *ELR*, 29 (Autumn 1999), 463.

⁴⁶ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven, 1992), 494.

⁴⁷ The 'Protestant soul' Natalie Davies writes, was 'left with memories, unimpeded and untransformed by any ritual communication with the dead'. Natalie Davies, 'Ghosts, Kin and Progeny: Some Features of Family Life in Early Modern France', *Daedalus* (1977), 95. 'The denying of Purgatory thus caused grievous psychological damage: from that point forward the living were, in effect, distanced from the dead' (Llewellyn, p. 27).

DEATH AND DESIRE IN *HAMLET*

thing – Of nothing' (2658–60): it is also unwholesome, toxic, 'a pollutant that threatens hygiene' (Llewellyn, p. 16). If soul and body part absolutely and irrevocably at the moment of death, then the corporeal remains have no meaning or value, are merely garbage, to be concealed or destroyed as soon as possible. Autolysis, putrefaction, the return to dust: these are simply God's methods for disposing of unwanted waste matter. Protestant polemicist John Polyander in *A Disputation Against the Adoration of Reliques* described human remains as 'the bones and garments of rotten bodies returned into ashes', 'rotten reliques of dead bodies', 'dust and putrefaction'.⁴⁸ In this sensibility the skull, evicted from its resting-place in grave or charnel, stinking of decay ('And smelt so? Puh', 3388) brings the alarming spectacle of what Aries called 'wild death' into the hygienic domain of the living.

In conferring humanity on Yorick's skull however Hamlet speaks from, perhaps even for, an older theology. In this context Yorick's skull is a relic, sanctified by the vanished presence of the life it contained, eloquent in its very deadness and hollowness of the absence that life has left behind. The skull is a memento, even a 'monument' to the memory of the dead. John Florio's English–Italian dictionary *A World of Words* (1598) identified 'the rest that remains, the ashes of bones of the dead' with both 'Reliquia: a relic', and 'monument'.⁴⁹ Through such relics, as Scott Dudley puts it 'the past continues to live in the present' (Dudley, p. 282). 'We cannot really speak with the dead', affirms Jurgen Pieters, but 'through the texts and other relics they have left us', the possibility of some kind of 'communication or transaction' arises.⁵⁰ The mortal body remains in some mysterious way blessed by the vanished presence of the life departed; and if Purgatory exists (as the Ghost of Old Hamlet affirms it does), then the skull is a link with the suffering spirit that still needs, and can still benefit from, our prayers. 'The continuing life of the soul, to which the relic refers, endows the relic itself with an ongoing life and potency' (Dudley p. 282).

Karen Coddon is correct then to state in her essay on *The Revenger's Tragedy* and 'necrophilia'

that here 'the body of death is at least symbolically conflated with the body of desire'.⁵¹ But to define this desire for the dead as 'necrophilia' is potentially misleading. Erich Fromm offers a typically modern psychoanalytic view of necrophilia in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*:

[For the necrophile] . . . only the past is experienced as quite real, not the present or the future. What has been, i.e., what is dead, rules his life . . . the past is sacred, nothing new is valuable, drastic change is a crime against the 'natural' order⁵²

Fromm explains necrophilia as a symptomatic response to the loss of certainty and to destabilising change. But in his love for the dead, exemplified in his loyalty to the ghost and his affectionate recollections of Yorick, Hamlet is responding to a deeper rapprochement of loss and desire: desire for the dead that have gone before, the dead we have always with us; the loss we cannot repair for the dead we are obligated in perpetuity to mourn. And in attempting if only briefly to hold 'conference with the dead',⁵³ Hamlet is also attesting to the enduring belief in their continuing existence.

Certainly this desire can participate in the damaging perversion of necrophilia, as graphically represented in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, where tonguing the poisoned skull with the rough enthusiasm of a 'slobbering Dutchman', the Duke licks the poison that will kill him, 'kiss his lips to death'. But Middleton is only exaggerating what Shakespeare made implicit in *Hamlet* a few years earlier:

⁴⁸ John Polyander, *A Disputation Against the Adoration of the Reliques of Saints departed* (Dordrecht, 1611), 1, 54, 65.

⁴⁹ John Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes, or Most copious, and exact Dictionarie in Italian and English* (London, 1598).

⁵⁰ Jurgen Pieters, *Speaking with the Dead: explorations in Literature and History* (Edinburgh, 2005), p. 130.

⁵¹ Karen Coddon, "'For show or useless property": Necrophilia and *The Revengers Tragedy*, *ELH*, 61 (1994), 71.

⁵² Eric Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (London, 1974), 339. Fromm echoes the commonsense views of both Claudius and Gertrude, who accuse Hamlet of exactly such disabling 'necrophilia': 'Do not for euer with thy veyled lids / Seeke for thy Noble Father in the dust (250–1).

⁵³ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, 4.2.22, ed. Elizabeth Bennan (London, 1964).

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

that the relationship between the living and the dead is grounded in desire, a Lacanian desire generated by loss, absence, lack of the loved presence. In 1919 Freud stated flatly that 'the goal of all life is death'.⁵⁴ 'Life has only one meaning', said Lacan, 'that in which desire is borne by death' ('*le désir est porté par la mort*').⁵⁵ Foucault spoke of 'the Death that is at work in suffering, the Desire that has lost its object'.⁵⁶ All these formulations concur in the paradox coined by Jonathan Dollimore: 'Death itself is the impossible dynamic of desire'.⁵⁷ In this context the uncanny skull, with its unmistakable deadness and its disturbing similarity to the living being, performs a central and pivotal function and role.

V

As Aries shows, while the ancients feared not being buried properly, Christians feared what might happen to the dead body to impede its resurrection in the flesh (Aries, p. 31). Anxiety over proper ritual burial was replaced by anxiety over the future fortunes of the corpse. A typical early mediaeval prohibition was recorded in the thirteenth century by William Durandus:

May this sepulchre never at any time be violated, so that I may return to life *sine impedimento* when He comes who is to judge the living and the dead.⁵⁸

The famous inscription on Shakespeare's own grave in Holy Trinity Church Stratford echoes this old imprecation:

GOOD FREND FOR IESVS SAKE FORBEARE,
TO DIGG THE DVST ENCLOSED HEARE:
BLESTE BE YE MAN YT SPARES THES STONES,
AND CVRST BE HE YT MOVES MY BONES.

Here we find an old fear of the grave's violation indicating a somewhat Catholic concern for the fate of Shakespeare's remains. The concern, whoever conceived it, over possible violation of the grave proved not without foundation, as the remains have of course been the object of intense curiosity, even to the extent of regular concerted

campaigns proposing their exhumation. The tomb has inevitably become a site of dispute over Shakespeare's identity: whether it contains a body at all, whose body it might be.

The motivation of those willing to transgress the tomb's exhortation and open the grave was to some extent articulated in the language of science. Their objective was either to confirm details of Shakespeare's appearance, so elusively recorded by the various extant portraits; or to prove that the grave's occupant (if it has one) is someone other than Shakespeare. These contradictory motives have enthused Stratfordians and anti-Stratfordians respectively: if the bones in the grave match the Droeshout engraving, then a link between man and work is established; if the grave were empty or otherwise occupied, this would fuel the mystery around theories of alternative authorship. Fantasies about finding manuscripts buried in the tomb are held in common: they might confirm once and for all Shakespeare's authorship; or they might be in someone else's handwriting. James Rigney finds in this tomb-raiding curiosity 'an archaeological concern to locate the authentic remains of the author and flesh them out in the lineaments of the artefact'.⁵⁹

At the close of the nineteenth century there was a vigorous public debate about whether Shakespeare's tomb should or should not be opened. Supporters advocated exhumation as a means of testing the portraits, and even photographing the remains before their inevitable dissolution. 'Think of a photograph of Shakespeare', mused J. Parker

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London, 2003), p. 78.

⁵⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'La Direction de la Cure', in *Écrits* (Paris, 1966), p. 642.

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, 1966), pp. 376, 387.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Dollimore, 'Desire is Death', in de Grazia, Quilligan and Stallybrass, *Subject and Object*, p. 373.

⁵⁸ Guilelmus Durandus, *Rationale Divinum Officium* (1286), 5: xiv; translated and cited Aries, p. 32.

⁵⁹ James Rigney "'Worse than Malone or Sacrilege": The Exhumation of Shakespeare's Remains', *Critical Survey*, 9 (1997), 78.

DEATH AND DESIRE IN *HAMLET*

Norris: “‘in habit as he lived’”. Would not such a relic be of inestimable value to the world?’⁶⁰ Very old exhumed corpses have been found to retain their form and the garments they were buried in intact, though these corrupt quickly once exposed to air. But Norris echoes a description of the Ghost in *Hamlet* (‘in his habite, as he liued’, 2518). Shakespeare himself of course is reputed to have played the Ghost on stage, so it would be in keeping for his ‘Canoniz’d bones Hearsed in death’ to ‘burst their cerments’ (632–3) as he returns to resolve our questions. ‘If we had but Shakespeare’s skull before us’, wrote Clement Ingleby, a Trustee of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, ‘most of these questions would be set at rest for ever’.⁶¹ Even the anticipated photograph of the remains would, in Norris’s phrase, be a ‘relic of inestimable value’.

Ingleby argued for disinterment, ‘a respectful examination of the grave’, on grounds of a legitimate ‘desire, by exhumation, to set at rest a reasonable or important issue respecting the person of the deceased while he was yet a living man’.⁶²

Beyond question, the skull of Shakespeare, might we but discern in it anything like its condition at the time of interment, would be of still greater interest and value.
(29)

Ingleby’s proposals were vilified as vandalism and sacrilege. Local Stratford dignitaries were clearly concerned about the Stratford monopoly on Shakespeare’s remains: ‘Photographs of Shakespeare’s skull’ complained Stratford councillor Alderman Gibbs ‘would, doubtless, have a large sale all over the world’.⁶³ J. O. Halliwell-Phillips argued that if the skull were found and compared to the Holy Trinity bust, any discrepancy would suggest that the skull could not be Shakespeare’s. This would in turn confirm the earlier rumour that Shakespeare’s skull had in reality been stolen from the grave, acquired by a ‘Resurrection Man’ and taken to America by phrenologist Johann Kaspar Spurzheim. A phrenological drawing, dated 1807 and attributed to Georges Cuvier, and which can be held to match the Chandos and Droeshout portraits, purports to have been taken from Shakespeare’s skull. And who would pay 6d to view

a tomb that had been proven not to contain the authentic skull of Shakespeare?

In any case, Gibbs asserted, the portraits of Shakespeare were obviously accurate, as they showed a man with a huge skull capable of containing the Shakespearean brain:

It is quite clear to all physiologists and phrenologists that the brain of Shakespeare must be enclosed in the skull of a fully developed man, the structure of whose head must be similar to that shown by the bust in the chancel.

(quoted Rigney, p. 86)

As Mary Thomas Crane has recently observed, ‘Portraits of Shakespeare emphasize the large dome of his forehead, accentuated by a receding hairline; he must have had a brain’.⁶⁴ Gibbs may also have been aware of the story that John Milton’s skull proved on exhumation to be disappointingly flat and low-browed, lacking the distinctive ‘supra-orbital development’ marking the skulls of both Shakespeare and Sherlock Holmes as repositories of unusual brains. Recently Petrarch’s grave has been opened and found to be occupied by the skull of a woman. Ironically this is exactly what happens in Belgrave Titmarsh’s Victorian burlesque play *Shakspeare’s Skull and Falstaff’s Nose*. The hero Dryasdustus, a Shakespeare scholar bent on proving Shakespeare’s plays were written by his ancestor Dryasdust, hires grave-robbers to open Shakespeare’s tomb. They find and produce the skull – ‘His fame was crumbled into dust, / Except the skull’ (Titmarsh, p. 23) – but it proves in reality

⁶⁰ J. Parker Norris, ‘Shall we open Shakespeare’s Grave?’, *Manhattan Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, 19 (July 1884), 73. Ingleby quotes Norris from the *American Bibliopolist* (April 1876): ‘If we could get even a photograph of Shakespeare’s skull it would be a great thing’ (Ingleby, *Shakespeare’s Bones*, p. 41).

⁶¹ C. M. Ingleby, *Shakespeare’s Bones: The Proposal to Disinter them Considered in Relation to their Possible Bearing on his Portraiture* (London, 1883), p. 34.

⁶² Ingleby, *Shakespeare’s Bones*, 30, 2.

⁶³ Reported in the *Stratford upon Avon Herald*, 5 October 1883.

⁶⁴ Mary Thomas Crane, *Shakespeare’s Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* (Princeton, 2000), p. 14. See also Sir Arthur Keith, ‘Shakespeare’s Skull and Brain’, in *Tenements of Clay: An Anthology of Biographical Medical Essays*, ed. Arnold Sorsby (New York, 1975).

GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

to be 'feminine'. This displacement of the overdeveloped, high-browed skull of the cultural hero by an inferior specimen – that of a low-brow, or even a woman – represents the kind of risk to cultural stereotypes entailed in exhumation. Charles Dickens during an earlier exhumation campaign was grateful that the Stratford grave remained inviolate, that Shakespeare's tomb 'remained a fine mystery', and no bardic skull had been produced and exposed in 'the phrenological shop windows'.⁶⁵

VI

These stories continually enact and re-enact a dialectic of desire and disappointment. Although by this stage articulated in modern scientific terms of phrenological mapping and photographic commemoration, this appetite for discovery remains recognisable as that familiar old hunger for the restoration of a lost presence, the necrophiliac desire for 'conference with the dead'. These Victorian scholars and enthusiasts coveted Shakespeare's skull with the reverence usually afforded to the relics of saints. Their aspiration to re-fit the authentic skull back into the portraits was not just to test the accuracy of portraiture, but to reassemble Shakespeare's fragmented parts into something resembling the living man. The prospect of finding in the grave not the true remains but a substitute, such as the skull of a woman, provoked in them profound anxieties of potential disappointment and disenchantment. Most chilling of all was the possibility of finding nothing: proof that no-one had ever been buried there; or simply evidence of the inexorable universality of decay. As Clement Ingleby recorded, the latter was a distinct possibility:

I am informed, on the authority of a Free and Accepted Mason, that a Brother-Mason of his had explored the grave which purports to be Shakespeare's, and had found nothing in it but dust.

(31–2)

Dust to dust, as the common phrase reminds us. But the phrase comes from the Christian burial service, and there it precedes an affirmation of faith

in some kind of return: 'in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life'. Like Stephen Greenblatt we began with a desire to speak with the dead, and equally we shall end with it. But not just to speak, since our desire for the dead encompasses also a desire for that fragile body with which the soul in its earthly life irrevocably and ineradicably interacted. Hence the 'almost imperceptible shift' noted by Aries in early modern England and France from 'familiarity with the dead' to 'macabre eroticism' (Aries, p. 376). If human remains, more strongly than any other personal memento or monument, could form a link between living and dead, then love for the departed must inevitably have gravitated towards those remains, and the remains themselves have become invested with an aura of divinity. The Eros in 'macabre eroticism' was not so much a perversion as a god. In Hamlet's attachment to Yorick's skull and in the Victorian scholars' coveting of Shakespeare's, we find a residual nostalgia for a historical culture in which the body was central. In Francis Barker's words:

The glorious cruelties of the Jacobean theatre articulate a mode of corporeality which is structural to its world . . . it represents a generalised condition under which the body, living or dead, is not that effaced residue which it is to become, beneath or behind the proper realm of discourse, but a materiality that is fully and unashamedly involved in the processes of domination and resistance which are the inner substance of social life.⁶⁶

Modern science has by no means effaced this nostalgia. In surgical anatomy or in forensic science, human remains, though of course devoid of vitality, are nonetheless a source of knowledge: they speak to us. In popular TV dramas about criminal forensics, scientists are often shown talking to corpses or bones. This approach is not continuous with the ancient pagan or early modern Protestant horror of the dead as toxic pollutants, but instead converges with the mediaeval and early modern

⁶⁵ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Georgiana Hogarth and Mamie Dickens (London, 1893), p. 111.

⁶⁶ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays in Subjection* (London, 1984), p. 23.

DEATH AND DESIRE IN *HAMLET*

Catholic view of the dead as alive, speaking, still accessible to inquiry, prayer and love. 'Necrophilia' as Karen Coddon puts it, 'yokes together science and seduction' (Coddon, p. 71).

VII

The skull in the portrait of John Evelyn with which we began looks towards both past and future. It glances back through the *memento mori* tradition to the Roman banquets where a grinning skull exhorted revellers to *carpe diem*, enjoy the fugitive moment. But as an anatomical specimen it also looks forward to an era of scientific discovery and understanding. It acts as a salutary reminder of mortality and a prompt towards righteous living; but in the context of Evelyn's marriage, it celebrates a strange union of love and death. The hol-

low skull echoes the vacancy that awaits all flesh; but also adumbrates in Jonathan Dollimore's words, 'the hollowing of life from within into desire as loss' (Dollimore, p. 381).

In much the same way Hamlet's commentary on Yorick's skull is both scientific and religious, both sceptical and reverential, both Protestant and Catholic. Warned by Horatio against considering things 'to[o] curiously', Hamlet's 'Imagination' nonetheless follows the logic of decomposition to imagine Alexander the Great's dust 'stopping a bung-hole'. At the same time his rehabilitation of the skull into the garment of flesh testifies to a reverence for human remains as sanctified relics of the departed. Desire is born of death ('*Le desir est porté par la mort*', Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 642); death is 'the impossible dynamic of desire' (Dollimore, 'Desire', p. 373).